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PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHTU #0816/01 0961438
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 061438Z APR 06
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0347
INFO RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 1132
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 1563
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME PRIORITY 0684
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000816

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STATE FOR NEA/MAG - LAWRENCE AND NEA/PI
EMBASSIES FOR NEA WATCHERS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/05/2016

TAGS: PHUM KDEM PGOV TS

SUBJECT: HOW THE GOT INTIMIDATES CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISTS

REF: A. 4/3/06 ERELI STATEMENT

1B. TUNIS 730

1C. TUNIS 666

1D. TUNIS 224

Classified By: AMBASSADOR WILLIAM HUDSON FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d)

11. (C) INTRO: Tunisian officials adhere closely to President Ben Ali's claim that Tunisia is making great advances towards becoming a modern, democratic state (Ref C), but it is no secret that authorities continue to monitor, intimidate, and

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seek to discredit civil society activists of any stripe. GOT tactics, although not lethal, rarely violent, or even as cruel as those of other authoritarian regimes, are well orchestrated, unrelenting, and damaging. The recent experience of Neila Charchour Hachicha has attracted international attention to some of these tactics, while the full range of official harassment is outlined in the annual Human Rights Report. However, we offer the following first-hand accounts from close Embassy contacts who experience, on a daily basis, the climate of fear, doubt, and intimidation the GOT has created inside what is in other ways a model society.

12. (C) CONTEXT: GOT efforts to intimidate activists, which may appear trivial on the surface, must be taken in the broader context of Tunisia, which is more efficient and transparent than many developing countries. Tunisians, particularly the educated middle classes of which most activists are part, are well aware of their rights and those Tunisian laws and policies that affect their daily lives. The GOT is proud of, and regularly highlights, the benefits of the rule of law in Tunisia. Thus, GOT harassment, particularly when it deprives activists of their economic or social rights, is even more brazen and disturbing. The small size of Tunisian society - only about ten million citizens - contributes to the feeling of outrage when laws or rights appear to be violated, because one's family, friends and acquaintances are immediately aware of one's alleged or actual transgressions. Tunisians also widely joke that one of every three Tunisians is working for the Ministry of Interior, leading people to fear talking about political matters with anyone other than close family and friends. Thus, intimidation is to some degree psychological, which in this society - especially among the elite - can be as repressive and damaging as physical assault or imprisonment in other parts of the Arab world.

13. (C) On April 4, the Department issued a public statement (Ref A) criticizing GOT intimidation of Mediterranean Liberal

Party founder Neila Charchour Hachicha and similar cases. Hachicha, and lawyer Mohammed Abbou (Ref B) who was also mentioned, have been victims of a variety of GOT tactics designed to intimidate and silence them. Like many activists, she hopes to continue her efforts to advance freedom and democracy in Tunisia. However, the daily harassment Hachicha and the other individuals mentioned here face is not likely to go away.

AHLEM BELHADJ AND "THE ETERNALLY ACCUSED"

¶ 14. (C) Belhadj is the President of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD), a local feminist organization that seeks to prevent discrimination, sexual harassment and violence against Tunisian women. While the ATFD has spoken out about the lack of political freedoms in Tunisia, the group generally focuses its efforts on advancing its main goals. However, this social orientation has not prevented the GOT from harassing Belhadj and other members of the ATFD.

Belhadj said the ATFD has been cut off from media coverage of its efforts and is not permitted to receive foreign funding or reserve meeting locations in Tunisia. The GOT also actively tries to prevent the ATFD from organizing its fundamental activities. When the ATFD proposed awareness programs, the GOT held similar events beforehand - seemingly to reduce interest in and attendance at the ATFD program. When the ATFD opened a small women's shelter, the GOT funded a new shelter operated by a GOT-associated women's group. ATFD supporters attribute these GOT actions as attempts to minimize ATFD's appeal and demonstrate that anything good for the people must come from the government.

¶ 15. (C) Belhadj's husband, lawyer Jalel Zoghlami, now calls himself "the eternally accused," due to the wide variety of legal cases that have been brought against him in an effort to pressure him (a former journalist who spoke out against Ben Ali) and Belhadj. For example, Zoghlami was imprisoned for allegedly assaulting a police officer, then subsequently tried for allegedly insulting a prison guard during his detention. Belhadj reports that Zoghlami has been prevented from working, as the GOT refuses to give him the police certificate needed to renew his professional license. Despite this, Belhadj continues her efforts to promote women's rights in Tunisia and laments that GOT harassment of civil society activists is commonplace.

NEZIHA REJIBA "UM ZIAD" - "THE FOREWARNED"

¶ 16. (C) Neziha Rejiba, known widely by her pen name Um (Om) Ziad, is the Arabic-language editor of banned on-line news magazine Kalima. Her articles are often strongly critical of the Ben Ali regime and have in recent months frequently mentioned allegations of the corrupt business practices of the Trabelsi family of Ben Ali's wife Leila. Following the UN World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) held in Tunis in November 2005, Rejiba received an anonymous phone call threatening her with unspecified retribution in the coming months. According to Rejiba, two sources contacted both her and her husband, lawyer and former opposition Parliamentarian Mokhtar Jellali, to warn them that the Ministry of Interior (MoI) had created a pornographic video with images of Jellali, which the MoI planned to send to Rejiba in what she described as "an attempt to break up our family." Rejiba told Poloff that she believed these phone calls were made by sympathizers within the MoI who disapproved of the MoI tactics and who wanted to alert her and her husband. Rejiba said that Jellali shortly thereafter received a letter which threatened to send the tape to Rejiba if a certain amount of money was not paid. Rejiba said that the letter specifically stated that the senders "were not the police."

¶ 17. (C) Following these communications, Rejiba alerted her children and relatives about the alleged MoI plan. Rejiba said that from the early warnings and the extortion letter she believed the tape was probably a montage using images of Jellali taken from MoI surveillance tapes of Jellali's office and edited to appear as if he was engaged in sexual acts. She said she stood by her husband, they refused to pay, and

that, upon receiving the tape, they destroyed it without viewing its contents. Rejiba cited numerous examples since the early nineties of activists who have allegedly been the targets of MoI defamation campaigns involving pornography or accusations of immoral sexual behavior. Rejiba also reported that since WSIS their home Internet service has been disconnected.

AHMED NEJIB CHEBBI - "THE BAATHIST ISLAMIST"

¶8. (C) Chebbi, Secretary General of the opposition Progressive Democratic Party (PDP), has long been at odds with the GOT but has come under increased attack in the past year due to his links to Islamist activists. Chebbi is a member of the 18 October Committee (Ref D), a group that is particularly disturbing to the GOT because it is an alliance between leftists and Islamists. While in Saudi Arabia on hajj in January 2006, Chebbi met with Rached Ghannouchi, the exiled leader of Tunisia's banned Islamist political party an-Nahdha. Since then, Chebbi has been the subject of widespread press defamation, including articles calling him a "political failure" and "Nejib Allah" and picturing him in Taliban headgear and a beard. (NOTE: Chebbi is clean-shaven and wears Western business attire. END NOTE.) When Chebbi participated in an American Enterprise Institute series on dissent and reform in the Arab world in late March, local newspapers denounced him as a "Baathist" and "undemocratic."

¶9. (C) Chebbi told Poloffs on March 22 that he is attacked in the press for his close contacts with the USG as well as his ties to Islamists. He argues that reform efforts in Tunisia need widespread domestic and international support in order to advance freedoms and democracy. Chebbi claims that while leftists and Islamists need to form an alliance now to combat Ben Ali's totalitarian regime, he has no intention of encouraging religious elements if and when the Tunisian political system opens up. Chebbi largely ignores government efforts to defame him and says that resistance is the best response to intimidation efforts, as the government will give up if one appears unaffected. Chebbi continues to travel internationally and appears not to be hurt economically by his opposition stance, perhaps because he is a member of an officially recognized party.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: Embassy officers actively engage these individuals and other activists similarly targeted to give them some cover and to show the GOT that the USG is fully aware of its harassment of activists. Some egregious cases have also been officially raised with MFA interlocutors, such as the continued imprisonment of lawyer Mohammed Abbou and the recent harassment of Neila Hachicha. However, the GOT usually has a legal argument about why the individuals' problems are unrelated to his/her politics. Despite the oppressive impact, GOT tactics appear more mean-spirited and petty in light of the fact that Tunisian activists generally lack an organized political constituency of immediate threat to the regime. END COMMENT.

HUDSON